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ABSTRACT

This project dealt with the quality of the child's life in day care centers and aimed at a better understanding of the concept of quality. The project was based on a synthesis of knowledge from various research traditions, as well as theories of education and developmental psychology (such as Bruner, Davydov, Leontiev, Piaget, and Vygotsky). The empirical data were collected mainly by observation. A number of 5-year-old children in Danish, Finnish, and Swedish day care centers were observed three times, each time for about 2 hours. Attention was focused on a single child at a time, on his or her activities, and on the child's interactions with peers and kindergarten teachers. Qualitative descriptions of the observations were analyzed. The preliminary results indicated that the concept of quality involves on the one hand the object of the activity, and on the other hand the child as a subject of the activity with others--children and adults. Further, it seems important for the child to be a subject together with other children, and to initiate activities both on a concrete content level, and on a content level characterized by ideas: metaphors, fantasy, abstract ideas, and symbols. Findings indicated that knowledge of the quality of life from the perspective of the child would enhance the development of the quality of education and care. (WJC)

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Paper prepared for The 5th European Conference on the Quality of Early Childhood Education, Paris September, 1995

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BEING AN ACTIVE SUBJECT AS AN ELEMENT OF QUALITY IN DAY CARE CENTRES

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ABSTRACT: Studies of quality are often aimed at defining dimensions of quality and at measuring different indicators of quality. An object of our project "Quality of the child's life in Nordic day care centres" is to get a better understanding of the concept of quality. *The project is built on the particular Nordic tradition in the day care area, but at the same time it van be seen as a contribution to the European discussion of quality in education and in the children's lives.*

The project is based on a synthesis of knowledge from various research traditions as well as theories of education and developmental psychology, a.o. Bruner, Davydov, Leontiev, Piaget and Vygotsky.

The empirical data was collected mainly by observations. A number of five-year-old children in Danish, Finnish and Swedish day care centres were observed three times, every time for about two hours. Attention was focused on a single

child at a time, on his or her activitites and his or her interaction with peers and kindergarten teachers.

The project is not finished yet but qualitative descriptions of the observations have been analyzed. The preliminary results indicate that the concept of quality involves on the one hand the object of the activity, and on the other hand the child as a subject of the activity together with others, children and adults. Further, it seems important for the child to be a subject together with other children, and to initiate activitites both on a concrete content-level, and on a content-level characterized by ideas: metaphors, fantasy-ideas, abstract ideas and symbols.

Knowledge of the quality of life from the perspective of the child will enhance the development of the quality of education and care.

Introduction

This project deals with the quality of the child's life in day care centres and aims at a better understanding of the concept of quality.

Our approach is based upon the following general reflections (Berg de Jong et al., 1993).

A theory about quality of life must be built on an understanding of what is essential in life. For the human being it is essential that he/she creates and changes his/her world and culture and thereby him/herself - together with other individuals. At every moment of life an individual by his/her activity is contributing to the creation and ongoing re-creation of the world and himself/herself. The individual is a subject in this process. For children aged 3-7 years an important element is play. Through their play activity they create specific cultural elements which may be subsumed under the term play culture. Accordingly, life quality is assumed to be related to whether

the individual is an active agent in the social life processes of which he/she is a part.

The above considerations are of a general character. They should help us to maintain an openness in the research.

Concrete manifestations of quality from the child's point of view may be (Berg de Jong et al., 1993):

- Activity, e.g. commitment, liveliness, absorption, fascination, involvement.
- Way of being, e.g. happiness, friendliness, kindness, obligingness, openness to other people.

Method

A number of children are observed in Danish, Finnish and Swedish day care centres. The method of following a single child by open observation has been applied (individual child tracking). The point of departure in this type of observation is describing the activities of the child as a ongoing process. Essential in this process are the object (see below) of the activity, the relations and cooperation with other children and adults, emotional expressions and so forth.

Analysis

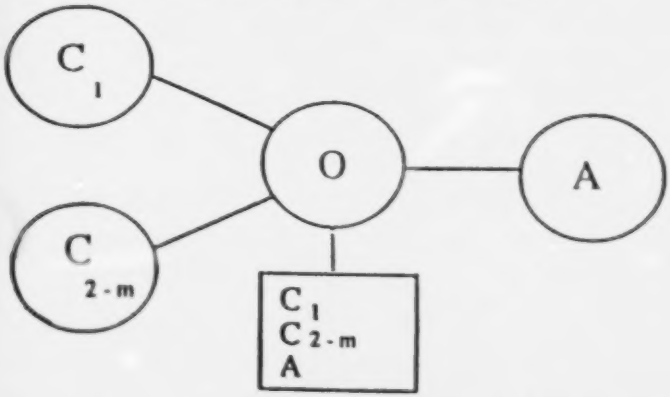
A major part of the data has been collected by now.

Using 'concrete manifestations of quality' as a basis we can sort our observation material. We look at the cases where the children are joyful, and at the opposite situations: where they are sad, disappointed, angry.

What characterizes the activities in these cases? This is where the actual analysis and discussion begin and where we penetrate deeper into the concepts. We look at that which characterizes the children's activities in connection with va-

rious concrete manifestations.

Our general reflections may be illustrated by this model which at the same time acts as a tool in the analysis:



C1 is child 1 and C2-m are one or more children. O is the object and A is the adult. The object seen from the perspective of different participants is illustrated by the box (Broström et al. , in press).

By means of the model different aspects of the children's activities are analysed:
What is the object in the activities unfolding in the various situations constituting the life of the children in day care centres? How is the object changed in the course of the activity? Furthermore, it may be used as an approach to the question of the child as a subject: are all the involved persons *source* of the activity, and if so in which way?

Object

The concept of object, in the sense what the activity is about, is discussed in an earlier paper (Broström et al., in press).

The object of the activity may be a thing, a physical object, or it may be an idea as when a doll is pretended to be a

baby in a pretend play. A child may also reflect on his or her own thoughts and feelings, and in this case these are the object of the thinking activity.

A preliminary analysis of the observations shows that the *imagination level* is predominant in the play activity of the children. A main characteristic of the object is a pretended content: 'feeding the baby', 'swimming as whales', 'making perfume' etc.

Physical aspects seem to be of secondary interest to the child, and likewise: technical sides of the activity are never central in the activity. Of course the children have to get in contact with the physical aspects of the objects (when, for instance, they pick flowers, or when they remove 'perfume' or apply soap to the bench). But these physical aspects and technical sides are usually not what occupy the children.

When a *technical interest* is observed it e.g. appears in the following ways:

1. Some girls are playing troll family. In a shelter they have made a very orderly arrangement of things used in the play: a tray with, among other things, a fork and a lot of small sticks that are food for the trolls.
2. On a wet day some boys are building a dam in the sandpit and become fascinated by the streaming water and a little lake that is generated. But note that the point of departure is the dam, and from there the boys go on to investigate the technicalities.

Maybe, what we are observing here are elements of interest in the technical aspects of the setting of the play and of the *construction* of this setting: i.e. building models and exploring things in the real world by means of such models. In other contexts it is observed that children of this age begin to focus on details, for instance, when building models of aeroplanes or

ships for the play.

The technical interest is also observed in projects arranged by the staff. An example of this is a kindergarten teacher and a group of children making 'grassmen' by means of a stocking which they fill with some material mixed with grass seeds. With buttons sewn onto it the stocking is made to look like a face. When the seeds begin to grow the face will be crowned with green hair. On the one hand the girls are very interested in the whole process of making grassmen. They try to do things right, to use needle and thread correctly when sewing etc., but also a little carelessly. It is noteworthy that the girls seem to be particularly fascinated by the beautiful buttons to be used as eyes on the grassmen.

It should be stressed that the object of the activity is usually constructed or reconstructed by two or more children in a joint process. The boys build a dam together. Three girls make up the troll play, they collect small sticks pretending them to be food for the trolls etc. That is, together the children make up their special play world with its imagined content. One gets an idea which another develops further.

These forms of object appear as activity content which seems to give the children an interesting life, joy and the like. The activities are mainly a joint matter. But a child may also be engaged in exploring, building or pretending activities on his/her own.

These activities are also seen in circumstances where conflicts between the children, bad mood and the like prevail - i.e. in conditions which lack the earlier mentioned concrete manifestations of quality. Thus, all children seem to aim at these activities.

Subject

With the point of departure in our general assumptions about the individual as contributing to the creation and ongoing re-creation of the world and himself/herself, an important question concerning 'subject' is: who is the source of the activity. Just as the object may be shared, so the process of constructing or reconstructing it may be a shared process. And if there is more than one subject: how are they sharing this process? How is this process accomplished?

Sharing in this process means dialogue and other forms of communication about the idea of the activity, verbal or perhaps emotional - with facial expressions or with the eyes, involving empathy and initiative.

We can distinguish the following different forms of sharing when being subjects in activity:

1. A child may initiate an activity and at the same time appeal to other children for their participation.

It may be termed *initiating participation*.

An example:

Two girls, one of whom is Lara, bring out a lot of cups and bowls containing sand which they will use for producing perfume.

The kindergarten teacher, Fred, suggests to May and Anna Maria that they should pick daisies from the lawn for their perfume.

They set off at once. Anna Maria returns, shouting: 'Lara, I have picked flowers for your perfume'. A little later May comes running: 'Anna Maria, come, we must pick flowers!' and they run out again.

Lara stirs a bowl of water into which they sprinkle the flowers. May shouts excitedly. Lara: 'Try smelling our perfume.'

They sprinkle petals into the bowl. 'It smells lovely of perfume.' Anna Maria: 'What do we need, Lara?'

May fools about: 'We need coffee and chives ..' She rattles off a lot of other mysterious items.

Then Anna Maria and then May begin to 'paint' the bench with 'per-

fume'. May laughing 'perfume off, perfume off.'

Lara pours 'perfume' with a shovel. Anna Maria and especially May laughingly make mysterious sounds banging their brushes against the bench.

Then May runs inside and applies a lot of soap to her brush. Shouts laughingly: 'Soap on, soap on' and starts to apply it to the bench they 'painted'.

May turns to run for more, but instead she runs around laughing with Lara and Anna Maria joining her. They run around laughing. Catch each other. Laugh. Run to the swings.

May initiates a transformation of the perfume play into making fun.

The example also shows how an activity uses material from earlier activities. The bench is painted with the perfume the girls have made of the flowers. Then again this activity is also transformed when soap is applied to the bench.

2. Two (or a larger number of) children may take part in the development of an activity. An example is May and Anna Maria joining in the already ongoing perfume play. It may be termed *creative participation*. Even though it is a joint and shared activity, the way of being subject may differ. It may be of an *initiating* or *complying* nature. Example: May and Anna Maria are not initiators in the perfume play, but complying to an existing play idea - however, in a very active manner and showing at the same time an open mind to suggestions and ideas produced by the other children participating in the play.

A child may also mainly be a 'performer' in a play - at the same time enjoying the resourcefulness and inventiveness of the more creative peers. In the example above May is such an inventive play partner, whereas Anna Maria more takes the role of carrying out her ideas, and at the same time enjoying the fun that arises out of Mays ideas.

These two forms are accompanied by expressions of joy and happiness with the activity and with the being together.

Thus, they meet the criteria of quality established in 'the concrete manifestations'.

3. Two other interrelated subject forms must be mentioned. By contrast they are more marked by conflict, anger, disappointment, or even a depressed mood, and less by shared joy, i.e. they lack the characteristics of the 'concrete manifestations' of quality:

An *initiating, directing and creative participation*, in which the child acts in a commanding and domineering way toward another child, may be observed. Correspondingly, a child may take part in a joint activity by only carrying out the ideas of the other child with a *performing, submitting participation*.

The domineering child does not consider the other child as a resource of ideas in the joint play, but rather as a 'performer' carrying out his/her ideas.

Such a process in which one child dominates the 'subject' role of the joint activity may lead to conflict, disappointment, and even that a child is forced out of the group as the following example shows:

Liz, Cathrine, Susan and Clara are in the room. Susan says to Clara: 'Clara, you stay here. You are the sweetest if you stay here.' Clara: 'I will.' She walks towards the door, saying: 'I will not stay here if it (the noise) is so loud.' At once Susan says: 'Then we will turn it down.'

Susan dances on the table. Liz and Clara walk around it. Susan: 'Good, then we stop.' She puts on the light. Cathrine: 'Good, then we can see better. Should we not pretend that I am the musical director?' Nobody makes a comment. Susan puts on a tape in the tape recorder. She says: 'The table must be moved.' Together they push the table up against the wall. Susan says to Cathrine: 'Cathrine, come on, you are no longer the musical director.' Cathrine accepts this and together with the other 3 girls she forms a circle. Susan says: 'Don't you know this song 'There was a man from the Red Sea', I will be he.' Susan organizes the 3 girls in a line. They begin the play. But it doesn't work. It goes a little to pieces. Susan

tries again: ' Do you know this one ...' Clara interrupts saying: 'Why should we not have music?' Susan looks at her and says: 'The ones that want music must leave.' Clara answers: 'I don't want music.' Both Liz and Cathrine say: 'Neither do I.' Clara says (cautiously): 'Perhaps Teddy wants music.' To this Susan replies quickly: 'No.' She talks a little with Teddy then she starts to sing: 'Two hearts afire, a woman and a man.' Susan sings on her own. Nothing really comes of the song, then Susan proceeds to organize a play called 'stop dance'.

Cathrine withdraws. She sits down in a box where she is almost completely hidden. Clara stands looking. Cathrine says, almost shouts: 'You just stand there and watch me sulk.' Susan approaches Clara and Cathrine. She grabs Clara's arm and leads her towards the sliding door. On her way Liz says to her back: 'You will not come in again.' Clara standing in the doorway says into the room: 'You will not be invited to my birthday.' Susan closes the sliding door. Clara stands outside. She tries to open the door and force herself inside.

If the children share the creative part of a joint activity, they seem to be enjoying the activity. This corresponds with our general assumptions about the human being as a subject in creating his/her world.

Looking at the emotions the children show, they seem happy with the different forms of sharing. E.g. happily May takes part in an activity initiated by others, and a little later transforms it into fun.

If a child wants to decide the play subject alone without openness to suggestions from other children and thus pressing them into performing agents only, a difficult situation arises for the child pressed into a performing role. He/she may become unhappy and maybe aggressive.

When it comes to being a subject in an activity, creating the world and creating culture, quality seems not to be related to the individual being the sole source of the activity without interference from others. Children create together, develop each

other's ideas in an atmosphere corresponding to the concrete manifestations described: they seem to enjoy what they create including the joint process itself. This appears from the emotional communication between the children.

Concluding remarks

To be subject in joint activity appears important when we take our point of departure in concrete manifestations of quality. To be disregarded, ordered about and placed in a performing role only is a situation containing negative characteristics as to quality: bad mood, anger and conflicts.

The children endeavour to take part in interesting activities and to contribute to the development of these activities and thus establish activities of quality for themselves, yet they may meet obstacles in the form of other children's wishes and domineering attitudes.

How should educational work meet these problems? What kind of educational culture should we aim at?

Until now three broad educational questions have arisen from our preliminary analysis:

1. It seems a prominent feature of the children's life in day care centres that together and by their joint activity they create their culture and by doing so create important conditions for their own life.

Might not this feature, that children jointly create culture, play a role in our reflections concerning curricula for children?

2. To a great extent the object of the activity of the children is located on an imaginative level. It concerns pretended situations, figures and things. The children build models of situations and things so to say. In their activity the children may be said to approach the concrete, real life situations and

play material from an imaginative model or fantasy picture.

Might not this movement from an imaginative model to the concrete level be included as an element in a curriculum?

Does the close adherence to the concrete level in current education of young children correspond to how children really think and learn?

3. It is a major feature that children explore together in the sense that they are subject together.

Is it possible to make a parallel along these lines: Could child and adult together become subject in a joint activity of exploring the world? Could this kind of joint activity be an element in our reflections concerning curricula?

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